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Evaluative study of honors classes giving: (1) Descriptive data, such as number, size, subjects; (2) general evaluation by faculty and students; (3) the operation of honors classes (objectives, course content, teaching methods, teacher contact with student); and (4) problems and suggested changes.

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Faculty Evaluations of Honors Classes, Fall 1958

Phyllis E. Pilisuk

University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan
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Preface

This study was conducted to gain a picture of honors classes, as they operated in the Fall of 1958. We tried to uncover some of the particular advantages which such classes hold for students and some of the problems which still exist in them. Data was gathered from 38 interviews with instructors of 36 separate honors classes in the Fall of 1958. (In two instances, more than one person was responsible for the course.) Interviews were conducted immediately after the close of the semester to avoid too much memory distortion. The results are divided into 4 sections covering: 1) descriptive data, 2) general evaluations of courses, 3) the operation of honors classes, and 4) problems and suggested changes.

I Description of Honors Classes

There were 57 honors courses and sections offered in the first semester of 1958-59. Eight of these were not treated as honors classes because so few honor students were enrolled in them. The small enrollment, in some cases, may be due to conflicts in the scheduling of honors sections in different departments. It may be possible to improve this situation by scheduling more than one honors section in a course, where possible, or leaving the time of an honors section open, to be arranged after enrollment.

This study represents virtually all of those honors classes taught in the Fall of 1958 in which there were enough honors students* to conduct the class on an honors level. The exceptions were: two instructors were not in Ann Arbor at the time of the interviews, and only a sample, four, of the 15 English 23 instructors were interviewed.

Honors classes were, on the average, smaller than regular classes; the mean size was 18. The range of size was from 8 to 35, with 41% having 15 or fewer students. (These figures do not include the 2 tutorials in our sample.) The average proportion of honors students in the honors classes under consideration was 70%; however, the proportion drops as low as 28% and is 60% or lower in 11 out of 34 classes. In several cases an effort was made to be selective in permitting non-honors students to join the class, but recruitment into honors classes still remains a problem.

Of the courses included in our data, 9 were in the humanities, 13 in the natural sciences, 11 in the social sciences, and 3 in mathematics and philosophy. Classes were typed according to whether they constituted a separate honors course (7 classes), a completely segregated group within a larger course (11), a separate recitation or lab class sharing lectures with non-honors students (16), or a tutorial arrangement (2). It may be noted here that the high proportion of honors classes which are only partially segregated, puts rather severe limitations on the operation of the Honors Program.

* In a few cases, honors students formed a minority, but other means of selecting "good" students were used.

II A General Evaluation

It is heartening to find that out of 36 teachers interviewed, 32 said that they liked teaching their honors classes, two were unsure of their feelings, only 1 disliked the experience, and no response was recorded for 1 teacher. When asked what it was that they particularly liked or disliked about teaching an honors section, the responses overwhelmingly emphasized what was liked. The most frequently mentioned answer involved the interest, enthusiasm, vitality, and attitudes of the students (19 teachers mentioned this). The intelligence, brightness, and quickness of the students appealed to 14 of the respondents. Other things liked were: the better discussions and questions, the opportunity to teach at a higher level, the creativity and originality of students, the greater degree of stimulation for the teacher, the possibility of covering more material or pursuing ideas further, the small size of the class, and student conscientiousness in doing the work. When we add to this, the finding that 64% of those interviewed believed they received greater personal satisfaction from teaching their honors classes than from comparable non-honors courses, the enthusiasm of the faculty for teaching these students becomes apparent. And this should not be ignored in assessing the effectiveness of the Honors Program, for students are very sensitive to the attitudes of their mentors and favorable attitudes give them extra spark and vigor.

However, not everything about teaching honors classes was enjoyed. There were 16 expressions of dissatisfaction in response to the initial question of evaluation. These will be covered more thoroughly in a later section of this report on problems in teaching honors students.

The interest of students in honors sections appears to be high. Eighty nine per-cent of the instructors stated that they observed a high degree of interest, or, where comparisons were possible, a degree higher than in similar courses. Most instructors based their judgment of high interest on the quantity and superior quality of questions and comments in class. Others mentioned the degree of effort put into the work, the personal expression of liking for the course offered by some students, and the apparent attentiveness in class. These data seem to agree well with the student evaluations in which 62% of the students found their courses quite stimulating.

Most (78%) of the instructors were satisfied, on the whole, with the degree of achievement of their students at the end of the semester. Four were not satisfied with the achievement of some students and four others were generally dissatisfied in this respect. A similar proportion, 81%, said they thought honors students learn more in special classes than comparably bright students in regular classes. It is interesting that of the seven who were skeptical about any increment in learning in special honors classes, none was a teacher of independent honors courses; they all taught either separate recitations or separate lectures in courses not specially designed for honors students.

III How Honors Classes Functioned

We were interested in whether honors classes were handled in ways distinguishing them from similar non-honors sections or courses. Therefore, most of the questions in this area were of a comparative type. For instance, teachers were asked whether they thought the objective of their honors section or course was any different from that of comparable non-honors classes. The results were as follows:

Percent of Teachers	Objectives
39%	definitely different
39%	not very different
8%	exactly the same
3%	no other comparable course
6%	don't know or not ascertained

The reader will note there is little or no difference in objectives for 47% of the classes. This clearly indicates the constraints put on the purpose of an honors class which is included as part of a non-honors course. One should consider this finding in terms of the overall objectives of the Honors Program.

In the instances where the objectives of the class were considered different, instructors were asked how they differed. Here, the answer most often given was that more work was covered or demanded. This response is somewhat difficult for the analyst to interpret because it is not always clear whether the extra work aimed at more extensive or intensive coverage. Moreover, the purpose behind the additional assignments was not always apparent. More satisfactory answers, from our point of view, describing course objectives, included such things as: a more critical or analytic approach; a concentration on the development of broader ideas; a more challenging, mature approach; more intensive probing; an emphasis on independent work; in the sciences, a greater emphasis on experimental, as contrasted with descriptive, material; a systematic coverage of contrasting theories, instead of a survey; and an aim to pique the curiosity of honors students. It may be seen that for many instructors, the perceived difference in objectives reflect a broader conception of what may be accomplished in special honors classes.

In the few cases where no comparable course existed, to which objectives might be matched, the purpose of the course was indeed unique. For example, the purpose of College Honors 31, "The Renaissance", was said to be to acquaint students with the essential value and unity of humanistic studies. Since its content cuts across art, literature, philosophy, and history, the emphasis on the "unity of humanistic studies" is unlike that of any non-honors course. Similarly, the objective of College Honors 33, "Revolutionary Ideas in Science", was to relate material in 5 discrete sciences through the concept of evolution.

The amount of work covered in honors classes was decidedly greater - 72% said that it was more and only 28% said it was about the same. This does not mean, in all cases, that honors students were forced to work harder than regular students; it sometimes means that classes proceeded at a faster rate because students were able to absorb the material more quickly.

Almost all of the teachers (89%) judged that there were differences in the content of the work in honors classes. Some of the differences in content are apparently aimed at meeting the objectives described above. The main categories mentioned were:

Frequency*	Difference in Course Content
17	- greater coverage
12	- greater difficulty, more advanced work, more involved problems
9	- more intensive work
8	- material organized around a specific theme, developed a general theory, developed broader ideas
7	- more written work - e.g., papers, reports
5	- performed experiments, lab projects or research
3	- greater emphasis on experimental approach (experiments not actually performed).
4	- other - e.g., more oral work, more independent library work
3	- no difference

* Frequencies add up to more than 36 because some teachers stated more than one difference in content.

Teaching methods used in honors classes were another subject for investigation. A large majority, 83%, thought there was some noticeable difference in methods. The most distinctive aspect of the conduct of honors classes seemed to be a more informal structure and, thus, a greater opportunity for discussion. (42% mentioned this aspect of teaching.) This informality is largely a function of class size. It was mentioned twice as often by instructors of classes of 15 or fewer than by teachers of larger sections. A related aspect of the teaching experience, mentioned by several, was the greater role played by students in conducting the courses. Students were called upon to give reports, to lead discussions and were generally given more responsibility for the direction of the course. Other notenble differences in teaching honors students were: the decreased need for repetition of material, the arrangement of special field trips and special meetings outside of class, less reliance on formal texts and study sheets, the possibility for offering more rigorous arguments, and the opportunity for giving more individual attention. Two teachers did mention that they gave more formal lectures than usual, but the trend is definitely in the other direction.

Seventeen percent of those interviewed observed no difference in their teaching methods. Most of the latter had larger classes.

As might be expected from the above information, a majority (74%) * of teachers had an opportunity for greater contact with students in honors sections than customarily. Nine said there was more student-teacher contact inside of class, 5 said there was more outside of class, and 11 said there was more contact on both sorts of occasions. This is probably an important achievement of the Honors Program. It is something which cannot be measured in terms of grade point averages or achievement tests, but which probably has long-range effects.

The question arises as to whether teachers paid a price in time for arranging the extra meetings, special field trips, extra office hours, and new programs for honors students. Indeed, a large proportion (42%) did admit that they had to spend more time in teaching their honors class than is ordinarily required. However, 47% said the time spent was about the same as that for similar courses. A few had no basis for comparison to make a judgment. We thought that the amount of effort expended might be related to the rank of the faculty member; i.e., that those newer to teaching would require more effort to prepare for their honors sections. But no differences between lower and higher ranking teachers were found. It is likely that the task of designing a new course - for many of the teachers were teaching honors classes for the first time- creates the need for extra work. In support of this hypothesis, it was found that 80% of those spending more time in teaching honors classes cited added preparation as one reason for this. This reason was mentioned more often than all others combined. Other areas in which more time was spent were: in conference, in grading papers, and in the laboratory. It is likely that as instructors become more experienced in handling honors sections or courses, the time required for teaching them will be reduced to the normal amount. This, of course, will hold only if the enrollment in classes is kept down to a manageable number.

One last question was asked about the operation of honors classes. This question inquired whether there were any particular aspects of the course in which the performance of honors students differed markedly from non-honors students, in comparable courses. A slight majority, 53%, of the interviewees noted some respect in which honors students excelled. The remainder saw no differences in regard to specific aspects of the course. The areas in which honors students seemed to stand out were: in understanding abstract principles and making relationships, in expressing themselves verbally or in writing, in their ability to do independent work and to make opportunities for originality, in their adeptness in handling mathematical problems, and in their capacity to perform "linguistic transformations".

IV Problems and Suggested Changes

Since the College Honors Program is still quite new, it was expected that a number of problems in teaching honors classes would exist. It was no surprise, therefore, when 78% of the instructors did find such problems. Difficulties varied a great deal from class to class; the only responses having some generality were those involving the heterogeneity of students in ability and background (mentioned by 31% of those interviewed). This supports the finding stated in an earlier report, based on student evaluations, that some students, in a given course, were finding the work too difficult and others were finding it too repetitious or easy. At that time it was suggested that improved selection methods, including general aptitude tests and specific achievement tests, be used to cope with this situation.

Because the other difficulties were so varied, it would be meaningless to try to summarize them. To give the reader a picture of the scope by these problems, I will merely list them in order of frequency.

* This does not include the 2 tutorial sections where greater contact is a foregone conclusion.

Number of Times Mentioned	Problems Found in Teaching Honors Classes
5	- (honors classes) more demanding for teacher
4	- grading problems
4	- motivating students to do routine but necessary work
4	- students ask too many questions and waste class time
3	- dealing with non-honors students in class
2	- insufficient background for honors work in field
2	- assumed a little too much knowledge
2	- arrogance and sarcasm of students
1	- domination of class by a few
1	- judging how much work to give them
1	- sustaining student interest
1	- over-confidence assumed by student when work easy
1	- students missing work when proceed very rapidly
1	- students too grade-conscious
1	- poor study habits of students
1	- too few really good students
1	- class too large
1	- poor teaching room for small class
1	- lack of appropriate teaching material
1	- coordination of course material (interdisciplinary course)
1	- getting good research projects for students (individual research course)

One item in the above list which should, perhaps, be mentioned is the problem of grading honors students. Teachers are concerned about penalizing students by marking them on a curve. There was some feeling that students given C's in an honors section would be getting A's or B's in a regular section. One instructor remarked that students at this level of ability should not be competing with one another for grades; this is not compatible with the best educational policy. He asserted further that students of high ability all need good grades to enter graduate school. It is apparently difficult to establish proper standards for grading honors students. An added difficulty is created by the non-honors students in the class, whose programs forced them to enroll in an honors section.

We were interested in obtaining teacher opinions on another sort of problem, one not inherent in the honors classes themselves. This involved any disadvantageous effects that the segregation of good students into honors classes might be having on non-honors sections. A third of the respondents were aware of no ill effects caused by the system of differentiated classes. Another 39% didn't know or weren't sure about this. And 25% believed there were some unfortunate results. The greatest problem, believed to be caused by skimming off the top students from regular classes, is a loss in spark or inspiration for the other students. In addition to those who were more certain about these results, half of those who were somewhat unsure about the actual effects thought there might be a loss of stimulus. Some of the latter, however, felt that this loss was small compared to the gains to be made. A few other instructors added that ill effects might take the form of apathy or discouragement in teachers of regular classes or resentment on the part of non-honors students.

In what directions do honors classes appear to be moving? This is partially answered by the projected changes for honors classes described by instructors. Faculty members were asked, "If you were to teach a class such as this again, would you do anything differently? Thirty-two out of 36 teachers said they would make some alteration in the conduct of the course. Of the remaining 4, 3 replied that they did not have the authority to make changes, and 1 wasn't sure about his plans. The type of change mentioned more than any other was that involving the syllabus of the course; e.g.,different readings, more diverse material, different sorts of papers, etc. Several thought they had underestimated the amount of work honors students were capable of covering and, therefore, thought they would assign additional readings, papers, etc. Some (5) said they would teach at a higher level; a few (3) thought they would give students more freedom to do independent work; others wished: to make class hours more flexible, to change the scheduling of material, to give students more guidance or structure in their work, to spend more time with students, to offer different types of laboratory problems, to schedule more evening sessions, to take a more critical approach, to grade more leniently, to clarify the grading policy early in the semester, and to give individual students greater opportunity to progress at their own rates.

One can see that teaching an honors class has been a learning experience for most of those involved. Instructors are still looking for appropriate materials, the proper amount of work to assign, the proper level of instruction, an equitable grading system, etc. We are of the opinion that this responsiveness of instructors to student needs (in the respects cited) is a strong point of the Honors Program.

A separate question was asked about suggestions for altering present curricular arrangements, that might make the Honors Program more successful. Here again, there were a wide variety of answers. A few maybe singled out for special attention because of their broad implications for the effectiveness of the Honors Program. The first of these points to the need for separate honors courses, where only separate sections now exist. Teachers supporting this point of view stress the limitations on varying the course program for honors students, on

holding them responsible for extra work, on giving them adequate examinations, etc. The need for this complete separation is probably greater in some departments than in others, but the values of a special course, versus a combined lecture with separate recitations, should be considered in terms of the aims of the Honors Program in the particular department. Another suggestion for departments to consider is the idea of omitting the introductory course for qualified students. It appears that for some honors students standard introductory courses, in certain fields, merely cover material with which they are already familiar. This leads to the kind of boredom, which the Honors Program was specifically designed to eliminate. The large task for the administrators of the Honors Program, with the help of the Evaluation and Examinations Division, is to improve selection procedures so that all students in honors sections are actually qualified to do honors work in the fields chosen.

A table presenting the other departmental and cross-departmental administrative changes suggested by faculty members is given below.

Suggested Curricular Changes in College Honors Program

Number of times Mentioned	
4	- Restrict size of honors classes
4	- Permit less formal class structure, e.g., fewer lectures
3	- Give instructor freedom to dispense with final exam, where feasible
3	- Improve coordination between departments in Honors Program
2	- Try to maintain classes only for honors students
2	- Avoid allowing students to overload themselves with courses
2	- Change content of course to cover less
1	- Put qualified non-honors students in honors courses
1	- Have more than one honors section of a course to avoid inter-departmental class conflict
1	- Find way of making students responsible for extra work (in sections of larger course)
1	- Involve senior members of staff in honors classes
1	- (Departments) should treat honors classes as a "literal fact", not merely an administrative unit (i.e., encourage different treatment)
1	- Should have special courses designed for honors students, not merely more difficult courses
1	- Clarify relations of honors courses to other courses in department
1	- Allow each department to set its own standards for the objectives of its honors courses
1	- Emphasize the learning of fundamentals before combined courses are offered

Number of times mentioned	
1	- Offer more joint programs between departments
1	- Should be more contact between teachers and those responsible for the philosophy of the Honors Program
1	- Arrange classes so that students are at one class level, not mixed freshman and seniors
1	- Give honors classes only above freshman level.
1	- Arrange way to have honors students meet instructors before clas ects
1	- Should be less faculty direction in social programs of honors students
1	- Provide for more lab space for honors classes
1	- Make available a list of research projects for coming semester (to facilitate tutorial research program in sciences)

Some themes that appear to be running through these suggestions are: greater flexibility in the operation of honors classes, the definition by each department of the objectives of its honors courses and sections, more coordination between departments and between the Honors Council and individual teachers. Other problems raised, which should be dealt with, involve limiting the course load of honors students, deciding under what conditions non-honors students be allowed to enroll in honors classes, and determining the standards for entrance into certain special honors programs (such as courses combining several disciplines).